

# First Holt Election Ruled Null and Void

Out of Political and Personal Animosities  
Emergenced Cultured Community

By ROMAIN SAUNDERS  
Editor-in-Chief, Diamond Jubilee Edition

The story of O'Neill has been hammered out on better typewriters than mine.

The first colony reached the present site of O'Neill on May 12, 1874, as wild rose scented the prairie.

Though the actual plat of O'Neill city was filed for record on August 8, 1874—three months after the first colonists arrived—The Frontier has elected to distribute this huge anniversary edition in late June, 1949, to mark the Diamond Jubilee year.

Hunting through records, reviving memories and an eager ear for the tales of a people in a community rich in story, legend and tradition this writer has discovered a vast amount of material is available.

This story is not so much concerned with the traditional official records that make history, though no story of the pioneers can be complete without such records. To deal in print with the settlement of this area it necessarily reaches into the limits of Holt county. And just where to begin first confronts the one who would tell the story.

Let O'Neill come first.

One-half mile East of the present limits of the city the first settlers pitched their tents in 1873. These were a few families from Southern Wisconsin, whose names have appeared before in The Frontier and we give them here again: H. H. McEwenoy, Frank Bitney, John T. Prouty, Eli and John Sanford and Elijah Thompson.

Sam, youngest son of Mr. and Mrs. Thompson, was a young lad at that time, now facing life's sunset, still living in O'Neill and only survivor of that group of "first settlers."

Gen. John O'Neill, an inspired Irishman, had a burden to settle throughout various sections of Nebraska 100 colonies of his countrymen who had become American citizens. The upper Elkhorn valley opened its harsh embrace to Irish-Americans from Pennsylvania and upper Michigan, who were neither farmers nor pioneers but statesmen all. The general brought here four separate colonies.

The first of these included: Patrick T. Hughes, Timothy O'Connor, Henry Curry, Thomas Connolly, Michael H. McGrath, Neil Brennan, T. N. J. Hynes, Michael Dempsey, Thos. Kelly, Robert Alworth, Ralph Sullivan, Patrick Brennan, Thomas Cain, Henry Carey and Patrick McKearney, the "Mc" was dropped and the family was known here as Kearney. There were three sons in this family, Luke, John and Tom, all becoming riders on the cattle ranges, and one daughter who married a ranchman. Mary Hanley, now living in Omaha, says her family came in 1874 with the first colony. They are not mentioned in some old records and the editor is pleased to have this addition to the foregoing list.

This first colony was brought in on May 12, 1874, the second followed in November of that year, the third composed of 102 men and a few women and children the following Spring. In 1877 the fourth colony of 71 men, some with their families, was added to the community. Most of the families and young men comprising these colonies settled on land acquired from the government by homestead entry.

In his work of colonization, General O'Neill had the twofold purpose of establishing communities of farmers where their religious life could be ministered to by priests of the Catholic faith. The first one to celebrate the mass of the church in O'Neill was Rev. J. P. Bedard, a French Canadian. This was in 1874. Father Bedard was an old man at that time and died in 1877. In 1878, Rev. J. T. Smith became the resident pastor of the Catholic group at O'Neill city.

An Odd Fellows lodge was organized November 30, 1876 with 10 members and on July 4, 1879, the Ancient Order of Hibernian Division No. 1 was organized with 12 members. The functions of societies had started.

General O'Neill's work had the backing and assistance of Paddy Ford's Irish World and a publication at Sioux City known as the Sioux City News.

It is the genius of Americans to amalgamate. Neither General

John's colonies nor the little group that was here first from Wisconsin were to have monopoly on the upper Elkhorn country. So there came out of Iowa and elsewhere land-seekers of every shade of belief and unbelief. Thus, there mingled with the Sullivans, the Brennans, the McCaffertys, the Biglins, the McCanns and the Hagertys the Pfunders and the Gatz' and the Schrams and the Macks. Some remained to walk hand-in-hand with hard living and are buried in prairie land. Others found their courage break under the pressure of winter blizzards, Summer droughts and the failure of potatoes to materialize to the tune of 250 and 300 bushels to the acre, which General John had told about. These gave up the struggle and returned from whence they came.

The first child born in O'Neill was a son born to Mr. and Mrs. James Ryan, a brother of J. B. of this city, and was born in March, 1875.

In that year occurred the first death when a daughter of the Michael McGraths died. The first wedding was a double headed, Neil McIlravie to Ellen Thompson, Samuel Wolf to Sarah J. Thompson.

The first postmaster the writer knew anything about was Pat Hagerty and his store was the postoffice. W. D. Mathews, founder of The Frontier, became postmaster by appointment in 1881, Thomas L. James being postmaster general at that time.

Neil Brennan and John J. McCafferty became associated in the hardware business though later they had separate hardware stores. The room above the McCafferty store—McCafferty's hall—for several years, was the social and entertainment center of the community—dances, lectures, shows, political conventions, and lodge meetings being held there.

There were accidents and shootings. Patrick Joyce was killed when his team ran away as he was loading a log on the wagon, being knocked down and crushed by the wagon. Daniel and George Biglow were caught by a cave-in of a 25-foot well and were taken out dead three days later. On February 1, 1882, Joseph Tomlinson met a like fate in a well. On April 24, 1878, a cowboy making his getaway with a stolen mule was shot and killed. On November 2, 1880, Stephen Keys was shot and killed by B. S. Gillespie, who was defending his home and family in the Turkey creek country from a band of raiders. Billy Reed shot Sheriff Kearns March 28, 1881. In January of that year C. E. Blanchard shot a young fellow from Texas and Justice of the Peace E. H. Doty held the shooting was in self-defense.

A half dozen bachelors of the first to arrive put up a sod abode for joint occupancy and flaunted a crude sign above the entrance "Grand Central Hotel." A takeoff I ran across once in Wyoming was a sign across the top of a long shanty-like building out in the hills, "Carrie Nation Saloon."

Sod houses roofed with timbers from the Red Bird were the original castles of the little set-



M'CAFFERTY'S STORE . . . Main floor featured hardware and rough boxes that were used for caskets. Second floor was known as McCafferty's hall and served as an entertainment center for the town.

tlement. After the second colony arrived in 1875 a Mr. Maybury put up the first frame building, Pat Fahy being the contractor.

To organize a stated territory into a county it was necessary to produce the evidence that there were 10 freeholders and 200 residents of the territory. Slicing out a territory of 1,540,000 acres of virgin sod from the government domain and finding the required number of freeholders, that is those who had title to their property, was a problem, but the conditions were met and on June 29, 1876, Gov. Silas Garber issued a proclamation appointing Elijah Thompson, J. B. Berry and James Ewing as special county commissioners; W. H. Inman, special county clerk.

The temporary county seat was designated at a point in township 28, North range 11 West—the home of H. W. Haines.

At a special election in 1876 Paddock became the county seat. At the later election O'Neill was accorded this honor.

On August 26, 1876, county officers were elected as follows: Judge—Ryland Parker; clerk—M. H. McGrath; treasurer—Wilson Hoxie; surveyor—T. N. J. Hynes; sheriff—H. H. McEvony; coroner—Herman Strasburg; commissioners—Patrick Hagerty, Jacob Shrob and Austin Hynes.

This election was declared illegal, so on December 27, the pioneer patriots went to the polls again. This time the following were chosen as the first duly elected officers of Holt county: Judge—John Cronin, clerk—J. T. Prouty, treasurer—J. L. Smith, surveyor—J. B. Tor-

bet, sheriff—I. R. Smith, coroner—Joseph Estep, superintendent of schools—Ed Whiting (a "squaw man" over on the edge of the reservation that is now Boyd county), commissioners—James Ewing, Harry Spindler, H. W. Haines.

An early function of government is taxation. In 1881 the taxable property was listed as follows: Real estate \$53,124; personal (mostly livestock), \$363,090; money and credits, \$6,468; mortgages, \$7,948; furniture, \$1,292; libraries, \$238; manufacturing, \$12,358.

Knox and Antelope counties formed the East boundry, the Niobrara river the North, Wheeler county the South and for elective, judicial and revenue purposes all the territory West. At that time the territory West was in the hands of the Spade ranch and their festive cowboys—those gun-toting gents on their little brown broncs making things lively when they looped into town. Mostly they were men who minded their own business but it wasn't advisable to antagonize one of the breed.

For revenue purposes, Holt assessed 1,400 acres in that territory at \$3,500 and hung \$151,101 on what livestock was found.

Holt county was destined to play a large part in the political affairs of the state with O'Neill a center of influence through the activities of its more than ordinary able citizens.

Against the tide of desperate men of the Middleton, Wade and Dutcher period; out of the bitterness and wreck of political and personal animosities there has come to fruition a community of cultured and industrious people who dwell on

## SAM THOMPSON, 80, LAST OF COLONY

O'Neill Man Has Vivid Memories of Sioux Indian Raids

Sam Thompson (below) stands by a rugged tree at his home in the Southeast section of O'Neill. At the venerable age of 80-years, Sam, as he is known by all the older citizens of the community, is the only survivor of the group of five families that established the first settlement in the upper Elkhorn valley in 1873 a short distance down the river from the spot where the first O'Neill colony cast anchor in 1874.

But four-years-of-age when he was brought into the virgin wilderness by his parents, Mr. Thompson retains vivid memories of "plenty of things that happened," as he told The Frontier interviewer.

The Sioux Indians, to the North, were making raids on the Pawnee to the South and wild warriors had no scruples about taking a white's scalp at any time.

Sam recalls that when he was five-years-old a band of Sioux warriors were headed for the little settlement by the Elkhorn and all gathered at the Thomp-



SAM THOMPSON

son home, the men with their muskets ready for the first appearance of the oncoming band of warriors. But the Sioux were after the Pawnee that day and did not molest the white settlers.

As a young boy, Sam was among others of the settlement

prairie land free and unafraid, doing their part to sustain the traditions and the heritage of American citizens.

For dates and statistical facts, I have had access to the records held by the Nebraska Historical Society and feel indebted for the uniform courtesy and assistance shown me by the personnel of the society.

who herded cattle near the mouth of Dry Creek and amused themselves racing their ponies after the antelope that seemed disposed to feed with the cattle.

Carlton Early Attorney —

Two blocks South and one block East of the intersection of Fourth and Douglas streets stands one of the early built houses in the then little village of O'Neill. And that was the home of Tom and Mrs. Carlton during the early history of the community.

Mr. Carlton was a member of the law firm of Carlton & Canton, and he was city attorney at the time of the Barret Scott affair. He went into old Mexico when Scott was reported to be there. After leaving O'Neill in the 1890s the Carltons went to Denver, Colo., and Mr. Carlton served as police judge there.

Postoffice Named for Mrs. Harker —

Postoffices that were established in Holt county during the 1880s in some instances were named after the wife of the first postmaster. Celia derived the name from Celia Harker, who with her husband, George Harker, established the office in 1885. When they moved from the community in 1888, Mathew Thewen took over, then from 1893 to 1909 the postoffice was in the home of P. J. Fritchhoff. The Lawrence Smith family now resides on the former Fritchhoff place. Mr. and Mrs. Lou Kissinger were next to handle the Celia in a 11. In 1912 the Jasper Corbett family, located where the Ray Pease family now lives saw the last of the postoffice and the community is now served by a star mail route. This embraces the East half of Sand Creek precinct, and regards itself as Celia.

## ON O'NEILL'S SEVENTY-FIFTH ANNIVERSARY

WE EXTEND . . .

*Congratulations*

No, Sir-e-e! It's not like the Old Days!

We're Proud to be a part of this



- ★ Progressive
- ★ Cooperative
- ★ Friendly

O'NEILL COMMUNITY

Pat Harty

# Welcome to the 57th Annual Holt County FAIR & RODEO

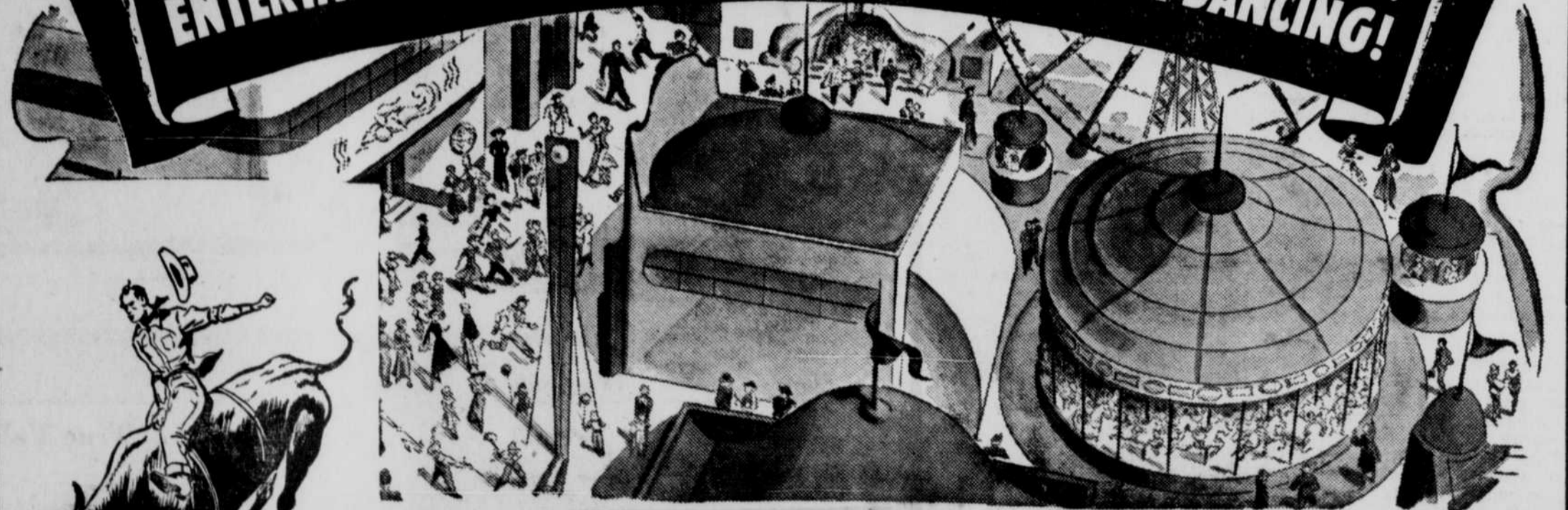
1892

1949

— CHAMBERS —  
AUG. 31 - SEPT. 1-2-3

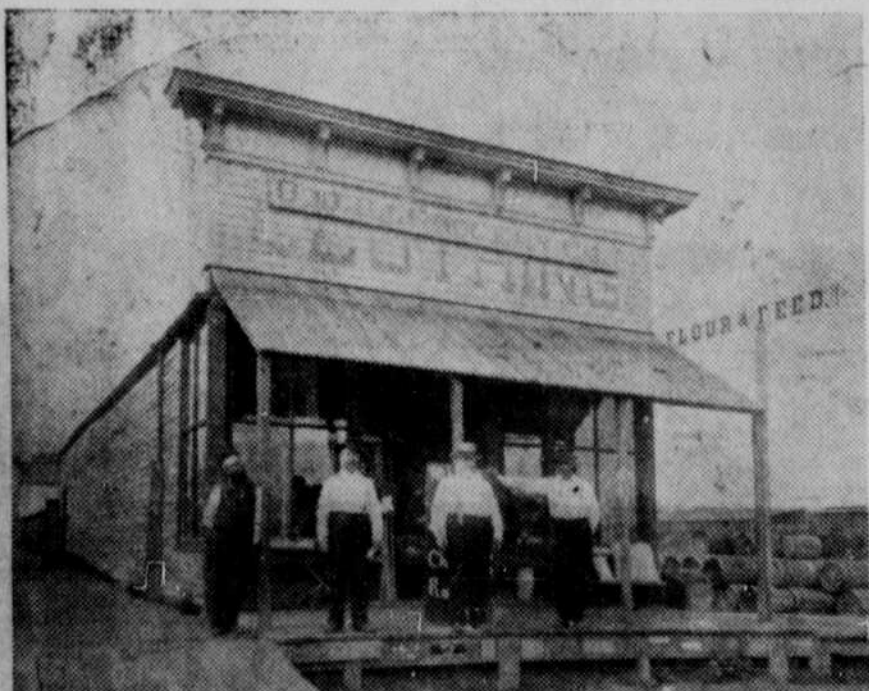
FOR FUN!  
EXCITEMENT!  
ENTERTAINMENT!

FOR PRIZES!  
FOR GAMES!  
FOR DANCING!



\$2000 IN PREMIUM AWARDS ON EXHIBITS \$2000

- ★ Livestock (4-H and Open)
- ★ Needlecraft
- ★ Produce
- ★ Poultry
- ★ Floats
- ★ School Exhibits
- ★ Cut and Fresh Flowers



AN EARLY TRADING POST . . . Hagerty's store was one of O'Neill's early landmarks. Standing (left-to-right) are: J. J. McCafferty, Neil Brennan, Patrick Hagerty and Wm. Fallon.